

TEACHERS' ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

King Saud University

Cell Phone: +966555122845 / Fax: 966-14682847

P.O. Box 69827, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: reima.al.jarf@gmail.com

Abstract

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has special online discussion forums for teachers as part of its internet website. The study surveys those teachers' online forums and reports the number of participants, number of threads and responses, topics with the highest and lowest posts and the forums role in teachers' professional development and their effect on their attitudes.

Introduction

Latest developments in information and communication technology made it easier for teachers to communicate with each other. Teachers no longer need to meet face to face to discuss educational issues and problems and exchange ideas and experiences. They can do so through mailing lists, e-mail, newsgroups, live chat, text-messaging, videoconferencing and online discussion forums. Synchronous and asynchronous online learning communities are widely used in almost every profession including education.

Several studies have investigated the effectiveness of participation in online discussion forums on teachers' performance and attitudes. For example, Carboni (1999) investigated the use of an online discussion forum to support practicing elementary school teachers' professional development in mathematics. The forum was structured around teachers' sharing, discussing, and reflecting on elementary mathematics teaching. The forums helped the teachers make sense of teaching mathematics, helped them support and share with each other as a learning community.

In another study, the pilot Teacher Dialogue Forums provided Georgia teachers with an opportunity to learn about current research on teaching and the teaching profession, share views and learn from colleagues, and let their voices be heard and used to shape practice and policy in teaching. The teachers appreciated the Forums and the opportunity to discuss teaching in the light of current research (Fletcher, 1999).

In a third study, the professional development experiences of 28 practicing teachers in ten Chicago suburban schools involved in a two-year technology-supported Problem-Based Learning curriculum development effort were explored by Hawkes & Romiszowski (2001). Asynchronous computer-mediated communications (CMC) were featured as teacher communication tools of the project. It was concluded that the value of CMC lies in its ability to facilitate professional collaboration between teachers and encourage critical reflection on educational policy and practice.

In a few studies, however, online discussion forums were found to be ineffective. McMahon (1997) reported that Teachers' inflexibility and lack of familiarity with the new technology were obstacles to the online professional development program using Mathematics Learning Forums. In another in-service professional development project for secondary mathematics teachers, the project staff struggled to build professional community through online discussions of teaching mathematics with technology. Although the project staff made structural adjustments to increase online participation, the discussion forum received little significant use. The face-to-face workshops were well-attended and judged highly effective by the participants (Stephens & Hartmann, 2004). Similarly, Selwyn (2000) found that, although the online forum was widely used as both an information and empathetic exchange resource, many claims of establishing collectively-focused virtual communities of teachers remain exaggerated, as the forum was limited by various caveats associated with computer mediated communications groups in general.

It can be concluded from the above studies that the effect of online discussion forums on teachers' professional development seems to depend on several factors. McAteer & Harris (2003) indicated that success is influenced by purpose, i.e., the reasons for introducing CMC, the content, tasks, intended outcomes, group profile and support systems available. Hough & Evertson (2004) added that clearly articulating purposes for discussions, framing the kind of participation expected, including both experienced and beginning teachers, and establishing trust among participants shape the kinds of issues and depth of thinking revealed.

As in many parts of the world, teachers' asynchronous online discussion forums have become an emerging phenomenon in Saudi Arabia and have become popular online learning communities that are moderated by teachers. Two years ago, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia officially launched online discussion forums for school teachers, supervisors, administrators as well as women's and teachers' college

faculty and students. They were established to create opportunities for in-depth peer-to-peer and student-instructor-administration interaction. The present study examines the kinds of topics, issues and problems posted, the forums' possible role in teachers' professional development, benefits and shortcomings of those forums as perceived by the participants. Advantages and weaknesses of the forums are reported based on the views of the forums' administrator, moderators and a sample of participating teachers, as well as a content analysis of a sample of threads posted and issues discussed.

Data Collection

The Ministry of Education's Online Teachers' Discussion Forms were browsed and examined. The total number of participants, forum categories, total number of threads and responses posted, topics with the highest and lowest posts and views and the percentage of active participants were calculated. For content analysis, the first two pages of each of the forums were examined, i.e. a total of 1476 threads. To find out whether participation in the Teachers' Online Discussion Forums have any benefits for teachers, and what role this participation plays in the teachers' professional development and its effects on improving the teaching-learning situation, the forum administrator, five moderators and a sample of 50 participating teachers were randomly selected interviewed. Results are reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

Table (1)

The Teachers' Online Discussion Forum Categories and Total Threads Posted

Forum Categories and Sub-categories	Total Posts
General: All educational issues, excerpts from newspapers. 4 Sub-categories: King Fahad, Independence Day, Education for all, Interviews with the Ministry administrators.	9,368
Male teachers' affairs: lessons plans, content analysis, objectives, testing, new teaching techniques	4,307
Subject areas: 9 sub-categories: Religion, Arabic, Social studies, English, Science; Primary; home economics and pre-school; physical ed and art education; special education forms.	3,032
Recreation corner: jokes, contests. 1 Sub-category: humor.	2,250
Female teachers' affairs: Transferring teachers, rules and regulations, adult education contracts.	1,837

Compunet: software and support. 3 sub-categories: Ma'aref, graphics and Karras forums.	1,045
Islamic Guidance: Quranic schools, Ramadan tent, advising students, teachers and society	942
Students' affairs: provides answers and solutions to students' questions and problems. 3 sub-categories: test questions; exam forum; extracurricular activities.	871
Supervision: exchanging knowledge and experiences with teachers. 1 sub-category: school administration.	735
Suggestions & technical support	713
Greetings & congratulations	705
Counseling: exchanging experiences among counselors.	665
Dialog center: Discussion of educational issues and human resources	590
Women's and Teachers' colleges: faculty, students and women's colleges sub-forums.	550
Students' health: Medical affairs, help, questions.	474
Training	373
Talented students	330
Educational research: Working papers, research articles, experiments.	313
Adult education and literacy	308
Evaluation: Comprehensive evaluation	202
Teachers in private schools	8

Results and Discussion

Forum Members

The Ministry of Education has 26 forum categories that include 48 sub-categories and 50 moderators (20 females and 30 males) (See Table 1). The Forums have 32,803 members: 75% are teachers, 10% are students and 15% are parents and other members of the community. However, participating teachers constitute 5.78% of the total number of teachers (425,826) in grades K-12 in the kingdom. This might reflect individual, social and technological barriers. Many teachers in Saudi Arabia are still techno-phobic, are not used to this kind of technology or have difficulty accessing and using it. Many feel that they do not have the time to participate.

Frequency of Use

The forum members have posted a total of 34,432 threads that generated a total of 304,030 responses. All posted threads are self-initiated. The forum administrator and moderators post one thread for week to assess members' views on a particular issue. Forums with the highest number of posts are: General (9,368); Male Teachers' Affairs (4,307); Subject Areas (3,032); Recreation (2,250); Female Teachers' Affairs (1,837) and Compunet (1,045). Two of these are non-academic (general and recreation). Forums with the lowest number of posts are: Students' Health (474); Training (373); Talented Students (330); Educational Research (313); Adult Education (308); Evaluation (202); and Teachers in Private Schools (8). The subject areas generated the following threads: Arabic Language (777); Science (582); English Language (353); Primary Grades (309); Physical Education And Art Education (393); Social Studies (180); Home Economics And Kindergarten (145) And Special Education (142) respectively (See Table 1).

Issues that generated the most discussion (over 50 threads) were: Contests (649 threads); chemistry questions covering curriculum (570); English language forum (350); primary grades skills (294); membership issues (from administrator) (235); graphics (213); fatawa about shares (185); test forum (180); midterm tests (176); extracurricular activities website (162); graduates' issues (152); a lecture about the rights of the blind (130); Ma'aref software (121); highlights of the school health forum (120); English exam questions (115); talented students (58); developing thinking skills (47); and college admission results (40). On the other hand, issues that generated the least discussion (under 20 posts) were: Using the computer in preparing audiovisual aids; job satisfaction among elementary school counselors; a guide to research skills; management by objectives; cognitive concepts in education for all; an education for all report; a plan for activating the education for all forum; 68 training programs in Hafr Al-Batin; a private school principal meeting in Madinah; school dropouts; education and WTO; oil prices are up and no jobs; educational supervision; parents are partners in decision making; an exceptional children's symposium; perseverance is the road to success; creative thinking skills; a motivating idea; test anxiety; using TV as a distance education medium; a framework for employing women.

Threads that triggered the most views (regardless of the number of threads) are: *Graduate issues (14,029 views); The ministry's test bank with key (10,229); Social*

studies new curriculum lesson plans (10,142); Test bank for all subject areas (8,252); College Admissions test results (7,832); Requests for changing details (6,883); Add a line of verse that you like (6,611); English language lesson plans (5,581); All you need about final exams (5,242); Elementary and secondary social studies questions (5,127); Teachers' college graduates (5,118); A daily quotable quote (4,665); About the teaching of math (4,163); Tips for teaching grade 6 (3,656); Grade 12 Ministry physics exam questions (3,219); Art education lesson plans (3,070); Largest clip art collection (downloadable) (2,936); A Vice principal's plan: all required records (2,885); Science websites (2,620); Complete collection of appreciation certificates (2,441); Ideas for Extracurricular activities (2,365); Download the strongest math software (2,279). On the other hand, threads that triggered under 20 views are: *New approaches for teaching math to special needs students; unhealthy children's habits; guide to teachers of the learning disabled; how to deal with the hearing impaired; a request for junior high school civic education test questions; the multiplication festival; organic compounds and the boiling point; geometry applications; science board summaries; games and contests; how to concentrate; ability test results; does the teacher need a record to follow up students' assignments; English is a society's culture; school administration and mental security; human development; a book on how to deal with people.*

Threads with the highest posts and views in the present study are inconsistent with findings of prior research. In the pilot Teacher Dialogue Forums provided to Georgia teachers, the issues that generated the most discussion were: *Teacher preparation; beginning teachers; professional development; teacher certification; administrative support; teachers as professionals; reorganizing schools; quality core curriculum; school funding and resources; and competitive salaries and teacher incentives* (Fletcher, 1999).

Teacher-Teacher-Administrator Interaction

The forum administrator and moderators reported that the forums receive lots of attention from the Ministry of Education's officials, who are themselves members and spend some time browsing the forums. They submit a monthly report to the minister on urgent issues and problems discussed such as: collapsing schools, students' absenteeism before final exams, teachers who are pre-occupied with the stock-market and ignore their teaching responsibilities, teacher transfer, unemployment among college graduates, and students with special needs. In addition, the teachers reported that they

find the forums very helpful. They can post requests for teaching strategies, lesson plans, audio-visual aids, software problems, materials and problems any time and receive immediate responses and help from several members. The forums help them communicate problems and suggestions to the Ministry officials.

Effects on Professional Development

The administrator, moderators and teachers indicated that the forums help the teachers exchange knowledge, information and experiences. They learn from others' posts, can upload materials, lesson plans, test questions, e-books, and software and learn from teaching tips offered. However, the effect of participation in those forums on professional development and on whether teachers are following the lesson plans, applying the teaching strategies posted, and readily choosing to incorporate web resources into their teaching cannot be estimated without pre- and pos-participation measures and assessment. However, Koszalka (2001) found that teachers who participated in computer-mediated discussions had significantly higher attitude scores toward the use of web resources in their classrooms than teachers who did not and were more likely to adopt such innovations.

Effects on Attitudes

An examination of a sample of thread contents showed that the forums created social inter-personal rapport among the participants. Male and female members are inclusive, supportive and receptive of each other's ideas and attend to each other's needs. The forum moderators exclude those who do not abide by the forum netiquette rules. Teachers who do not feel comfortable speaking in public, may post responses and requests without having their identity disclosed as they use a nickname.

As in the present study, Fauske & Wade (2004) revealed that both men and women used a range and a mix of discourse strategies. Both men and women were inclusive, supportive, personalizing, receptive to others' ideas, and attenuating. They were also willing to be critical and to challenge others' assumptions, images, beliefs, and positions, which they usually prefaced with supportive and attenuating remarks. In addition, both men and women were equally likely to mock and exclude those who did not abide by the conventions of the group norms, although such comments were uncommon.

Shortcomings

Despite the many benefits, the Ministry of Education's Online Teachers' Discussion Forums have several shortcomings. One is that only 22% of the participants are active. They search, post issues, and materials, and respond to queries. Another shortcoming is that the forums are socially opaque as 96% of the members use a nickname and thus participants may not know who they are addressing or interacting with and who is posting what.

Although the discussion threads have generated 304,030 responses, 90% were compliments and not real comments. The volume of threads and responses is overwhelming which makes it difficult to locate a certain topic. The system's search tool is inefficient. When a keyword is entered, a random list of threads is obtained. Searching by author's name is more produces more accurate results. It is time-consuming to read and respond to the messages of so many teachers. Moreover, 32% of the threads are not related to a forum's main theme, the message subject is not specified as in *question; I have a problem; please help me; Traffic Week; greetings & congratulating; to whom it may concern*.

Furthermore, the main forum categories are too broad and some are overlapping. This led some members to misplace their topics. Threads with specific subjects such as generated more threads, responses and views than non-specific ones.

Finally, non-educational issues such as greetings, entertainment, contests, poetry etc. received more attention and seemed to be more attractive than educational issues as they constituted about 38% of the total posts. Teacher issues received more attention than student issues (20% and 6.5% respectively). Although the illiteracy rate in Saudi Arabia is 21%, less than 1% of the total threads were allocated to adult education. Personal issues and problems, and day-to-day teaching problems and tasks received more attention than highly specialized educational issues. Teachers seemed to be more interested in obtaining ready-made lesson plans, test questions, test results, extracurricular activities, and worry about supervisors' evaluations than training, self-improvement, attending conferences and symposia, results of educational research, comprehensive evaluation, use of technology in teaching and others (4% of the total threads), probably because most teachers did not receive any pre-service preparation nor in-service training and hence they are not familiar with them.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education Online Teachers' Discussion Forums in Saudi Arabia are becoming popular among teachers. An average of 100 members join the forums daily, and they post an average of 94 threads and 935 responses per day. Participants post conference and symposium announcements; graduate college admission deadlines; test dates, reports; forums; resources; links to educational websites; lesson plans, teaching tips and ideas, newspapers articles discussing an educational issue; using the computer in preparing audiovisual aids; recruitment issues. Teachers post critical reflection on educational policy and practice. The Forums seem to be ideal for fostering dialog among teachers, school administrators, supervisors and ministry officials. They promote asynchronous self-directed learning, peer support and greater involvement in teaching-learning and student-teacher issues. They provide an opportunity for cognitive, social, and teaching presences, essential for the successful development of online learning communities. Although the members constitute a homogeneous group and the climate of interaction is warm and positive, forum categories need to be more focused, message subjects need to be brief, clear, specific and posted under the designated category. Adding an index or thesaurus of terms will help teachers enter their comments in the right place.

To overcome the overwhelming amount and variety of information posted, and to facilitate the later storage and retrieval of specific information, the study recommends that a teachers' network with several databases, similar to Discovery School and teachers' T.V. In addition to the Teachers' Discussion Forums, the network databases may include different subject areas, a test-bank; lesson plans; teaching resources; e-library, teaching ideas; conference dates and calls; live training and tutoring; web-links; news about current developments in the profession and others. Each of these may be created in hypertext and searched in a way similar to specialized database searching such as ERIC. To help teachers join the forums and network, links should be included in the 42 school districts' websites. Orientation workshops and user guides may be used to introduce teachers to these technologies which will ultimately lead to better communication and interaction among members of the education profession.

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356
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